

The Italian Invasion of Greece in 1940: When Operational Art Does Not Close the Gap between Tactical Engagements and Strategic Objectives

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

The Italian Invasion of Greece in 1940: When Operational Art Does Not Close The Gap Between Tactical Engagements and Strategic Objectives, by Major Stefano Catania, Italian Army, 52 Pages.

This monograph investigates the Italian invasion of Greece in October 1940 from an operational perspective. It seeks to identify those factors—relevant for modern practitioner of operational art—that caused the stalemate of Italian forces by December 1940 and the ensuing intervention of the German army to secure the southern border of the alliance. The work addresses the Italian invasion's operational approach while accounting for the relevant elements of the strategic context that influenced the events. Namely, it sheds light on the sentiments of rivalry and competition that animated Mussolini's decision to invade Greece.

Additionally, the research illustrates the shortfalls and misplaced optimism of the Italian generals in terms of the employment of operational art. Thus, it uses the case study of the Alpine division "Julia" to examine how the actual campaign overlooked fundamental intuitions in terms of operational reach, basing, and operational tempo. Lack of resources and the absence of an effective centralized coordination added chaos to complexity resulting in a general withdrawal and the necessity to receive support from Germany. Hence, the conclusion of the monograph uses the dimensions of strategy to depict several lessons for current and future operational planners. The latter have to be ready to frame the operational environment while considering the intangibles involved in the conflict, and leaving space for a large degree of flexibility to adjust the plan as the operation unfolds.

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Introduction

On 15 August 1940, an unknown submarine sank the aged Greek cruiser *Helle* in the harbor of Tinos, and set the stage for what became the focus of Italian and Axis attention over the last months of that year, namely the war in Greece. Shortly after the sinking, both the British and the Italian navies promptly denied any sort of responsibility for the event. However, the commander of the Italian armed forces in the Aegean Islands, General Cesare Maria De Vecchi, shed light on the entire episode, confirming that an Italian submarine, *Delfino*, had carried out the attack.¹ Two days prior to the *Helle* episode, Benito Mussolini had summoned General Sebastiano Visconti Prasca and the governor of Albania, Francesco Jacomoni, to Rome, for a private talk with Galeazzo Ciano, the foreign minister, and himself.² Here, Mussolini outlined his military and political guidelines, in which he expressed his intentions to obtain the *Ciamuria* region and the island of Corfu from the Greeks.³ Mussolini's willingness notwithstanding, the shortfalls of Italian military capabilities that Prasca briefly underlined, ultimately led the *Duce* to postpone the action toward the end of September, albeit without establishing an exact date.⁴

Regardless of the Fascist political propaganda statements, the occupation of Greece had always been a possibility since the occupation of Albania in April 1939. As a matter of fact, the Italian commander of the forces in Albania, General Alfredo Guzzoni, shortly after the occupation had conceived a draft plan to extend the Italian offensive operations against Yugoslavia and Greece. The plan called for no fewer than eighteen divisions to achieve the objectives, which was combat power hardly conceivable for the Italian Army in 1939. Yet, by

¹ Mario Cervi, *The Hollow Legions: Mussolini's Blunder in Greece, 1940-1941* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 29-30.

² Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943* (Rome: Castelvechi, 2014), 457.

³ Region of Epirus along the coast, extending south of the Kalamas River to the town of Preveza. See figures 1 and 2.

⁴ Sebastiano Visconti Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia* (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1946), 31-32.

July of the same year, the document was on the table of the Italian army Chief of Staff, General Alberto Pariani, for his approval.⁵

That same year Germany had invaded Poland and carried out a momentous attack with tanks, aircraft, infantry, amphibious units, and artillery evidencing both its military and industrial power.⁶ Those events influenced Italian politics and drove Mussolini's decision to hold back his commitment to the conflict in order to make a better assessment of the entire strategic situation. As a result, he ordered the armed forces to avoid any initiative that might openly show favor toward the Germans, and informed Guzzoni that Greece was no longer an Italian strategic objective.⁷ Still, in December 1939, General Carlo Geloso, before assuming command of Italian ground forces in Albania, asked Mussolini whether Greece was likely to be a strategic objective or not. The answer was negative, further adding that he had already spoken with the Greeks reassuring them that they were not in his sights.⁸ Likewise, the message with which Mussolini declared Italian opposition to war in June 1940 and restated the absolute unwillingness of Italy to drag down into the conflict neighboring countries such as Greece, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. What happened next could not have been more different from what Mussolini had stated.⁹ Hence, Geloso who was aware of the fact that Italy was on the brink of joining the war, revised the Guzzoni's existing plan for an offensive operation in Greece. Thus, in May 1940, when Ciano went to Tirana and asked Guzzoni for a military assessment regarding a possible invasion of Greece, he candidly answered that given the actual strength of Italian forces in Albania, a swift

⁵ Mario Montanari, *Politica e Strategia in Cento Anni Di Guerre Italiane* (Rome: Stato maggiore dell'esercito, Ufficio storico, 1996), 40-41. General Alberto Pariani, was Chief of the General Staff and Under-Secretary of War from 1936 to 1939, he reorganized and reduced the strength of Italian infantry divisions from three to two regiments, "*divisione binaria*."

⁶ Robert Michael Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 265.

⁷ Ibid., 336.

⁸ Luigi Mondini, *Prologo Del Conflitto Italo-Greco* (Rome: Treves, 1945), 15.

⁹ Montanari, *Politica e Strategia in Cento Anni di Guerre Italiane*, 336.

and rapid offensive was simply unfeasible. Yet, such a well-rounded and unfavorable military estimate of the situation did not match exactly with Ciano's expectation. Hence, once in Italy, Ciano pushed the army general staff to relieve Geloso, and beginning in June 1940, Prasca was the new commander of the Italian Army in Albania. From that moment on, the Italian general staff began revising the plan to attack Greece, originally conceived by Guzzoni, further modified by Geloso, and named it, *Esigenza G*.



Figure 1. Greek Territory in 1939. Ibiblio.org, "Hyperwar/UN/UK/UK-Med-I, Map I-13," accessed 23 October 2018, <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/UN/UK/UK-Med-I/maps/UK-Med-I-13.jpg>.

Geloso's plan rested on two main assumptions: first, Greece would have no more than three divisions to defend its easternmost territory north of the Arta River up to the international

border in Epirus. Second, Italian operations would require no more than eleven divisions.¹⁰ In light of that, by September 1940, the army general staff had revised Geloso's plan and issued a modified version calling for the anticipation of the invasion while assuming the arrival of the reinforcements from Italy. The concept of the operation was a single swift thrust into Greece to occupy Epirus and seize control of the island of Corfu to prevent British forces from establishing a safe port there. Furthermore, the massive support of the air force was to provide additional depth and combat power throughout the entire campaign to achieve the objectives.¹¹

The appointment of Prasca as the new commander of Italian forces in Albania spurred different reactions within the inner circle of the high-ranking generals who saw the looming operations against Greece as an easy way to get promotions.¹² This aspect became relevant in the way it affected Prasca's mind and operational process while he prepared and executed the subsequent operation. The fact that Prasca was very ambitious made him resemble precisely the person that the fascist establishment was looking for at that moment. His mistake was indeed his confidence that a Greek campaign would result in a great success. Thus, he reassured *Duce's* ambitions and set about further revising the plan. Unfortunately, this revision emerged from a merely theoretical standpoint and did not consider various emerging factors in the international political situation, nor an in-depth analysis of the mission variables and the operational environment.¹³ Prasca devised a two-phase plan: the first phase was a feint on the Macedonian front to hold the bulk of the Greek forces, while the units on the west, representing the main

¹⁰ Mario Montanari, *La Campagna Di Grecia*, vol. 2 (Rome: SME, Ufficio storico, 1980), 227. General Carlo Geloso was Commander-in-Chief of the Italian army group in Albania.

¹¹ Filippo Stefani, *La Storia Della Dottrina e Degli Ordinamenti Dell'Esercito Italiano*, vol. 2 (Rome: SME, Ufficio storico, 1985), 117-119.

¹² Visconti Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia*, 5.

¹³ "Mission variables consist of mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, time available, and civil considerations (METT-TC)." US Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), 1-2.

effort, would make the initial thrust into Epirus. The second phase was the arrival of three additional divisions and the subsequent occupation of the rest of the territory and Athens.

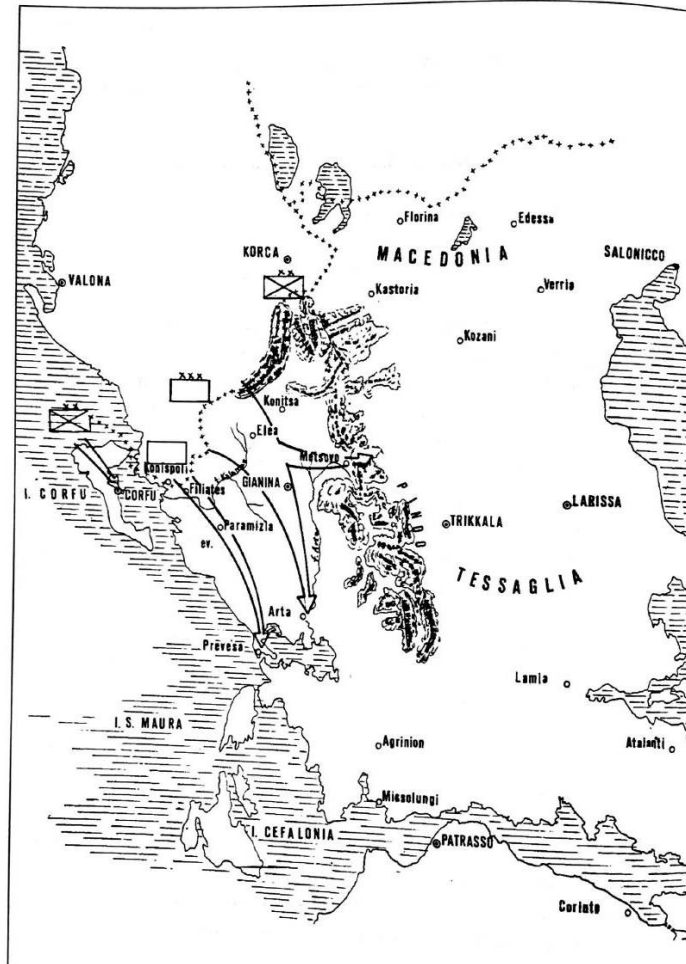


Figure 2. Concept of Operation of Army General Staff Plan. Mario Montanari, *Politica e Strategia in Cento Anni Di Guerre Italiane* (Rome: Stato maggiore dell'esercito, Ufficio storico, 1996), 357.

In accordance with this plan, operations started on 28 October 1940 and culminated after 13 days without achieving any of the strategic objectives set by the *Duce* and exposed Italian units to tremendous hardships and a large number of casualties. However, interestingly enough, the historiography of World War II has often considered the Greek intervention as evidence of Mussolini's fascist obtuseness rather than an example of a military campaign to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the Italian practice of what is today termed operational art. Though

the analysis of the sources does not entirely disprove the general view, it is also true that the Italian strategic decision and descending operations to secure the southern border of the alliance may offer an interesting standpoint to highlight the importance of the modern elements of operational art.

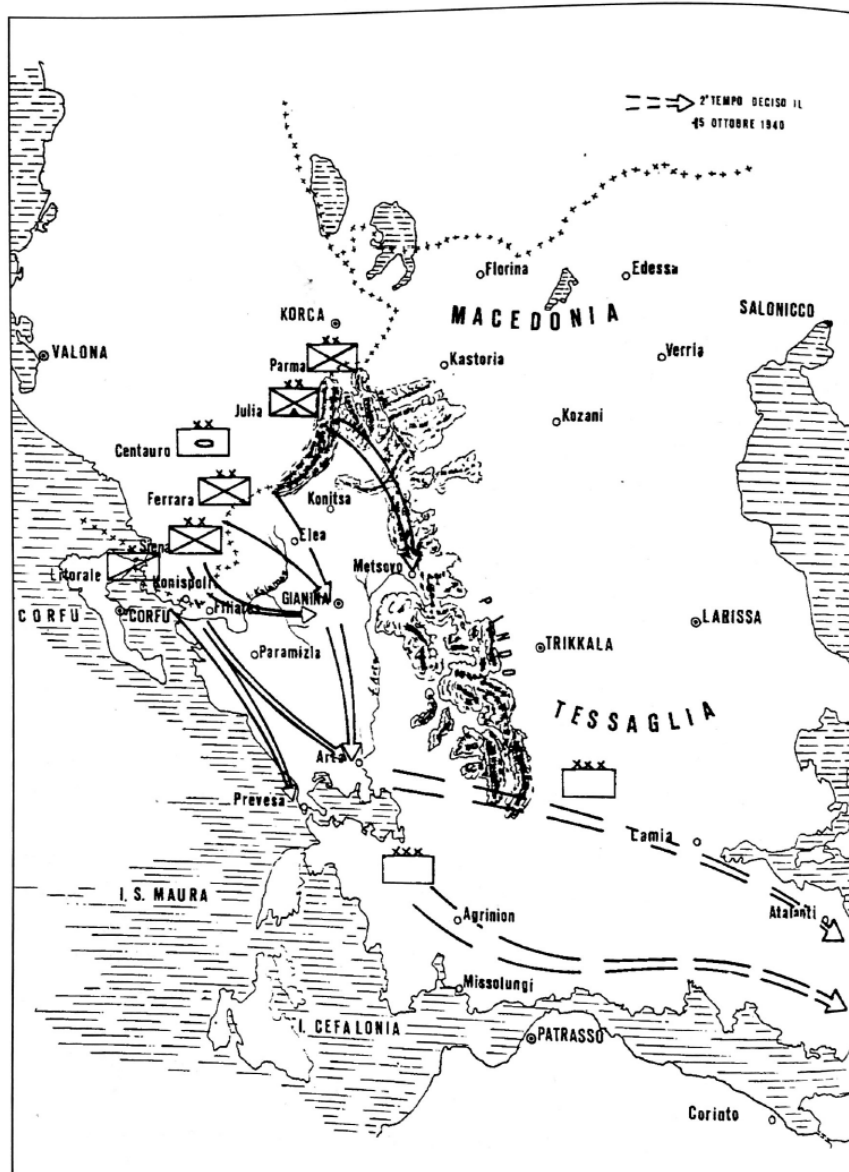


Figure 3. Concept of Operation of Visconti Prasca's plan. Mario Montanari, *Politica e Strategia in Cento Anni Di Guerre Italiane* (Rome: Stato maggiore dell'esercito, Ufficio storico, 1996), 358.

Operational Art is the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.¹⁴ Thus, the illustration of the shortcomings and strengths in the operational approach of Prasca in Greece through the lens of the modern doctrine offers a fresh perspective on a relevant military episode of the war often overlooked by English-language professional literature. Moreover, the role of the Italian army generals and the submissiveness and hubris of most of them emerges as a constant limitation to the effectiveness of the operation process throughout the campaign on the Greek front. Similarly, the tendency of the military leadership in overlooking the real capabilities and their weak bearing when it came to arguing against Mussolini's decisions posed a great constraint to an army capable of momentous accomplishment at the tactical level.

Considering the limited works in English on Italian operations in Greece, the use of Italian sources is paramount. Namely, the account of the invasion provided by the historical archive of the Italian army general staff and the memoir of Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia*, offer a unique opportunity to illustrate the Greek campaign through the lens of operational art. The former provides the chronological unfolding of the operations and elaborates on Mussolini's strategical guidance in the frantic initial moments of the Italian thrust. The latter is the perspective of a commander who executed the operation employing operational art while complying with little direction from higher military echelons and operating in an everchanging political and strategic context.¹⁵ Similarly, the English translation of the 1949 book, *The Battle of Greece* by General Alexander Papagos, commander-in-chief of the Greek armed forces at that time, together with the numerous accounts on the German strategy that led to the war, are additional fundamental sources for examining the operational environment from different perspectives.¹⁶

¹⁴ US Army, *ADRP 3-0, Operations*, 2-1.

¹⁵ Visconti Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia*, vii-viii.

¹⁶ Alexander Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940-1941* (Athens: Hellenic Publishing, 1945).

The relevance of the elements of operational art throughout the Greek campaign illustrates the links between Italian military strategy and the tactical actions carried out by the army during the first months of the Italian commitment to the war. Namely, the analysis of the first frantic stages of the campaign sheds light on the rationale behind the decisions of the division commanders to achieve the objectives set by Prasca and the *Duce*. Hence, what emerges is that operational art does not stand alone. Instead, it is the salient integration of warfighting functions and the tenets of modern doctrine to balance the application of the art of command and the science of control.¹⁷ Thus, the account of the Italian units on the Greek front, such as that of the Alpine division *Julia*, represent an essential part of the research to understand the effects and the outcomes of the Italian generals' arrangement of tactical actions in time and space.¹⁸

The way the Italian generals developed their operational approach in Greece resembled the way modern commanders address current operational environments. The same cognitive processes used by military commanders in the past when facing an unfamiliar problem was an anticipation of today's design. This way of thinking helps to frame the environment and the problem and to develop an operational approach, which gives a comprehensive logic to the campaign or the operation.¹⁹ In addition, it provides the commander's vision of how the operation will unfold and is a flexible process that keeps adapting following the change of circumstances.²⁰ In this view, the Army Design Methodology serves as a "methodology for applying critical and creative thinking to understand, visualize, and describe problems and approaches to solving

¹⁷ US Army, *ADRP 3-0, Operations*, 2 – 5 .

¹⁸ Enzo Raffaelli et al., *Campagna di Grecia: Alpini e Fanti, la tragica avventura ellenica, le conseguenze dell'8 settembre 1943, Creta, Cefalonia, Corfù, Lero* (Treviso: Editrice Storica, 2010), 25 -30.

¹⁹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Allied Joint Publication AJP-01 (E), *Allied Joint Doctrine* (Brussels: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO Standardization Office, 2017) 4-5.

²⁰ Ibid.

them.”²¹ Namely, the use of design methodology in historic perspective offers interesting similarities for the commander to shape his operational approach and translate strategic concepts into executable plans.²²

Once commanders and staffs have framed the problem, they use doctrine to develop an operational approach with different options. The operational approach is necessarily the way a commander anticipates how to achieve the desired conditions. Namely, the US Army uses Unified Land Operation, with its fundamental tenets of simultaneity, depth, synchronization, and flexibility to achieve the assigned tasks.²³ The same tenets underpinned the Italian plan for the invasion of Greece, although whether the plan achieved its objectives or not was a measure of how effective was the use of the elements of operational art. The objective of Unified Land Operations is to “seize, retain, and exploit the initiative to shape the operational environment.”²⁴ In order to do this, commanders and staffs use operational art to plan and execute operations characterized by the four mentioned tenets while continuously seeking for the initiative and maintaining an offensive posture.

Thus, joint doctrine clearly states that operational art is not an activity limited to a particular command level, but is inherent in all moments of design as well as in all levels of command.²⁵ Furthermore, this definition also entails what Soviet General Georgii Samoilovich

²¹ US Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 5-0, The Operation Process* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 2-4.

²² US Department of the Defense, Joint Staff, *Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), xxi.

²³ Simultaneity is the execution of related tasks at the same time across multiple locations and domains; depth is the extension of operations in time, space, or purpose to achieve definitive results; Synchronization is the arrangement of military actions in time, space, and purpose to produce maximum combat power at a decisive place and time; flexibility is the employment of a versatile mix of capabilities, formations, and equipment for conducting operations, US Army, *ADRP 3-0, Operations*, 3-13 - 3-14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-1.

²⁵ Operational art is the cognitive approach of commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to

Isserson argued on operational art. He posited that operational art was the chain of combat efforts implemented along the front and throughout the depth of the enemy's formation as a highly efficient system coordinated purposefully and sequentially to bring about enemy's defeat.²⁶ Today, the modern practitioners of operational art must be familiar with these criteria, for they operate in a dynamic and complex operational environment in which multi-faceted threats spur multiple dilemmas for the commanders.

Similarly, the Italian invasion of Greece evinced how the aspects of operational art have always existed across history. The episode represents doubtless one of the most important operational and strategical turning points in World War II; it marked the definite and complete commitment of the Italian political and military effort. Furthermore, the ensuing setback of the invasion eventually forced Germany to intervene and adjust its strategic objectives toward the Mediterranean Sea instead of the envisioned Caucasian oil fields. Regardless of the overall failure of the plan, and various setbacks suffered by Prasca during the Greek Campaign, the considerations in terms of operational art had great relevance to facilitate the German effort in the region the following year. The stalemate in which the Italian army found itself by December 1940 mitigated the risk of the complete Italian strategic collapse and allowed a smooth transition to the subsequent phase of the Greek campaign alongside with the Germans.

Thus, it is clear that the movement of nine divisions to execute *Esigenza G* on 28 October 1940 did not occur overnight, nor was it the consequence of Mussolini's abrupt change of mind. It was instead a deliberate plan conceived for the swift invasion of Greece, in which each division commander had a clear sector and orders to arrange his tactical actions in time and space before the actual beginning of the invasion. The three main sectors were Epirus to the west, the Pindus

organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, means, and risks, Joint Staff, *JP 5-0, Joint Planning*, xxi.

²⁶ G. S. Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: SAMS Theoretical Special Edition, 2005), xviii-xx.

Mountains to the center, and the Korca sector to the east. The whole plan was joint in nature. Ground operations were to follow air force and navy interventions that would have had to achieve air superiority and control of Corfu respectively, to set conditions of security and to block Greek reinforcements coming from the adjacent units. However, from the outset, the plan did not unfold as designed, and the ensuing outcomes proved disastrous to Prasca and his commanders on the front as well as to Mussolini and Italy.²⁷

Strategic Setting

To understand military events, it is important to look at the preconditions and the context in which they unfolded. Namely, strategy is one of those elements of a given military context that allows connecting “operational capabilities and political objectives.” It works as a glue, “which binds one to the other and gives both sense.”²⁸ Italian military strategy grew within the international geopolitical environment of the interwar period, characterized by significant uncertainty and strategic ambiguity.²⁹ World War I had ended leaving all the major belligerents under severe financial strains that had their lowest point with the economic crisis of 1929. The League of Nations notwithstanding, the major democracies showed a pale commitment to the high cause of this institution, favoring more the unilateral pursuit of their own strategic interests rather than a coherent unified vision toward the balance of international relations. Thus, France, Great Britain, and the United States found themselves staggering under postwar debts and deferred any military initiative to contain spending increases. The four remaining major military powers, Germany, the Soviet Union, Italy, and Japan faced similar dark postwar scenarios with

²⁷ Visconti Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia*, 56-58.

²⁸ Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 12.

²⁹ Allan Reed Millett, “Patterns of Military Innovation in the Interwar Period,” in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, ed. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 333.

the only difference that by the mid-1930s all of them saw the rise to power of authoritarian governments.³⁰

The European political situation preceding the outbreak of World War II saw the growth of three competing ideologies: the first was liberal democracy, such as that maintained by the United States and Great Britain, while the other two belonged to the realm of the revolutionary forces, namely the revolutionary Left and Right. As far as liberal democracy is concerned, regardless of the narrative of this period to establish an international Rule of Law and an enduring peace, scholars argue that the majority of the actions of the United States and Great Britain followed significant economic interests.³¹ For example, in Great Britain, domestic working-class upheavals combined with turmoil abroad, in Ireland and in the Middle East, spurring government intervention and significant economic effort. Similarly, starting in 1936, despite the fascist connotation of the Greek dictatorship, Great Britain deemed it fundamental to retain its influence in that country and to keep General Ioannis Metaxas aligned with the Allies. A case in point was the economic agreement of 26 January 1940 between Britain and Greece to the settlement of the Greek external debt for the duration of the war.³²

The remaining ideologies were essentially the opposite outcomes of the same base phenomenon, which was the spreading of a domestic discontent within societies. For example, in the Soviet Union, by the end of World War I, the discontent of the populace drove the Bolsheviks to power. They drew their support from workers, soldiers, and sailors.³³ However, that very close political relationship between revolutionary party, democratic assembly, and industrial proletariat

³⁰ Ibid., 334.

³¹ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 119-120.

³² M. E. P., "Greece and the War," *Bulletin of International News* 21, no. 3 (1944): 91-101.

³³ William A. Pelz, *A People's History of Modern Europe* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 127-141, accessed 17 September 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c2crfj.14>.

disappeared shortly thereafter, giving way to the disintegration of the industrial proletariat.³⁴

Thus, those preconditions along with the Civil War and the dismal economic situation eventually favored Josef Stalin's rise to power, who found a way out of the crisis regardless of the enormous losses and human sufferings.³⁵

Similarly, Germany and Italy saw the rise of other forms of extreme political ideologies, different in nature, but similar regarding radicalism: Nazism and Fascism, respectively. The Nazi party met with the sentiment of discontent of the working class and the middle class who blamed the Weimar Republic for the gloomy economic situation that was affecting the country in the interwar period. Thus, in 1933, millions of German people voted for Nazi candidates, and facing rising political violence, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler chancellor to try and stem it. Following Hindenburg's death in 1934, Hitler violated the restrictions on re-armament in order to restore the military might of the country and the national honor he thought had been offended at Versailles.³⁶ In Italy, likewise, emerged Fascism, another form of right-wing extremism. Similarly, this less brutal ideology stemmed from the discontent of the middle class and the ambitions of a man like Mussolini, who rose to power seizing the opportunity to blame the previous socialist government for the huge losses and the denial of Italian war gains.³⁷

The complexity of the diplomatic relations mirrored the uncertainties and differences existing among the competing ideologies and policies. For example, on the brink of the invasion of Poland, at the beginning of June 1939, the diplomatic situation was anything but clear,

³⁴ Neil Faulkner, *A People's History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 237-50, accessed 18 September 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1k85dnw.18>.

³⁵ Michael Reiman, *About Russia, Its Revolutions, Its Development and Its Present* (Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang AG, 2016), 85-100, accessed 19 September 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4dn7.8>.

³⁶ Pelz, *A People's History of Modern Europe*, 139-40.

³⁷ Ewa Czerwińska-Schupp and Maciej Żurowski, *Otto Bauer (1881-1938), Thinker and Politician* (Boston: Brill, 2017), 295-350, accessed 18 September 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w76v3b.14>.

although almost every country saw the looming possibility of a new world war and made every reasonable effort to avoid and control the escalation of events. The French government under Édouard Daladier sought out the creation of an alliance between the western powers and the Soviet Union to form a strong deterrent against looming German expansionism. This alliance though did not come about because of the firm request of the Soviets to include Finland, Latvia, and Estonia within the terms of the agreement. It occurred because the Soviets had not yet abandoned their foreign policy's revolutionary theme of 1926 that, "in order to win conclusively, the capitalist encirclement must be replaced by a socialist encirclement, and the proletariat must be victorious in these countries."³⁸

In light of that, Paris and London perceived that the real Soviet objective was to legitimize its future intervention inside the Baltic territories more than everything else.³⁹ Furthermore, Poland hastened the situation by opposing the Russian requests.⁴⁰ Hence, the Russians favored the proposals of the German ambassador in Moscow, Friedrich von der Schulenburg and signed the Nonaggression Pact with Germany (23 August 1939), which had a twofold outcome. First, it paved the way for the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 and second, gave Stalin the possibility to deal unimpeded with the Japanese in Manchuria.⁴¹ Consequently, it emerges that this strategic context, allowed setting the best conditions for German military actions and marked a clear shift in power within Europe, which affected relations with the Italian dictator. Thus, the possibility of becoming a satellite of Germany loomed over the horizon of Italy's future, which did not align with Mussolini's ideas.

³⁸ D.W. Spring, "The Soviet Decision for War against Finland, 30 November 1939," *Soviet Studies* 38, no. 2 (December 1986): 207–26, accessed 23 February 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/151203>.

³⁹ Montanari, *Politica e Strategia in Cento Anni di Guerre Italiane*, 12-13.

⁴⁰ Grigore Gafencu, *Ultimi Giorni Dell'Europa* (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1947), 177-178.

⁴¹ Stuart D Goldman, *Nomonhan, 1939: The Red Army's Victory That Shaped World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013).

In Italy, even before the rise of the Fascism, public opinion was already enthusiastically oriented toward a foreign policy aimed at the expansion of territory in accordance with the steady growth of the populace and the need of more resources and opportunities.⁴² Therefore, when Mussolini took power, he kept fostering those sentiments of expansion and made the Italian army general staff work relentlessly on several planning options oriented toward the major neighboring theaters. Indeed, *Duce's* political ambitions primarily focused on those countries where he foresaw the possibility to enhance his political power both internally and externally, regardless of the fact that they might pose a real threat. Therefore, the orientation of operations directed immediately across Italian territorial boundaries seemed to be the most likely objectives on which to concentrate planners' efforts. France, Yugoslavia, Greece, Albania, and the northern African coast were the major regions addressed by Italian military planners, but those efforts hardly synchronized with the swirling turn of a foreign policy not clearly structured on specific guidance, but more often driven by secret alliances or the personal settlement of disputes, rather than a coherent vision.⁴³

Greece numbered among the European countries ruled by a dictator. General Ioannis Metaxas had acted as the military ruler since the failed attempt to form a constitutional government in August 1936. Although his regime was unpopular in many quarters, the dictator appeared firmly established as Greece's leader. He faced little internal opposition.⁴⁴ Despite the far-Right connotation of his political view, Metaxas kept Greece aligned with British government in the fine European equilibrium. The Greek chief of the armed forces, General Alexander

⁴² Giorgio Rochat, *L'esercito Italiano Da Vittorio Veneto a Mussolini, 1919-1925* (Rome: Laterza, 2006), 517-518.

⁴³ Montanari, *Politica e Strategia in Cento Anni di Guerre Italiane*, 165-167.

⁴⁴ M. E. P., "Greece and the War," 91-101.

Papagos, clearly stated that Germany and Italy solely “aimed at turning Greece into an obedient tool in the service of the military and political interests of the Axis.”⁴⁵

Since 1936, the two objectives of the Greek government’s military preparations were: first, to fulfill the commitments of the Balkan Entente, signed in 1936 and, second, to cope with Bulgaria, on the assumption that it would take the initiative in starting a conflict.⁴⁶ From the political standpoint, unlike other Balkan countries, Greece had no serious minority problems. The major issue was along the Albanian frontier where Italian territorial claims over Epirus had risen. Italian leaders eventually would call for its annexation and would invade.⁴⁷ No sooner had the Italians occupied Albania in April 1939, than they assured Athens that they would respect Greek integrity and independence. However, the Greeks remained concerned about having the Italians at their borders, for they might support the Albanian irredentist movement to spur upheavals within the Greek border district of Ciamuria. The Italian promises were a paper tiger, so much so that the chief of Yugoslavian general staff, General Dusan Simovich, on 3 May 1939, wrote to Papagos that he did not rely on the assurances offered by Italy and Germany.⁴⁸ In his letter, he also furthered his misgivings foreshadowing an Axis attack in three phases: (1) attack against Rumania, (2) joint Italo-Bulgarian attack against Greece, and (3) a massive attack against Yugoslavia.⁴⁹ In hindsight, from the operational standpoint, Simovich had accurately laid out the Italian strategic objectives of the Greek theater.

⁴⁵ Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940-1941*, 80.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 235-236.

⁴⁷ M. E. P., “Greece and the War,” 91.

⁴⁸ Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940-1941*, 93-95.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

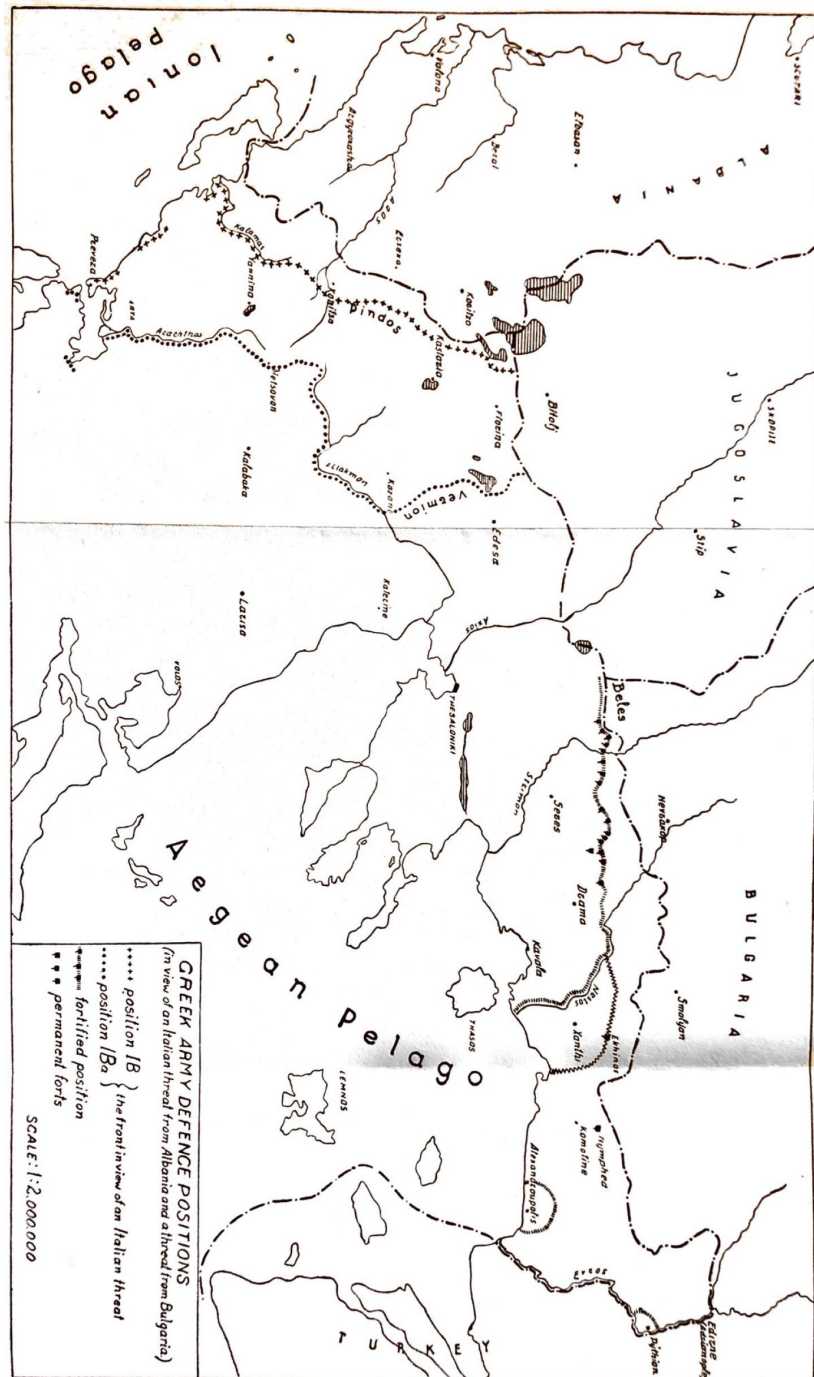


Figure 4. Greek Preparation of the Front and Army Defense Positions. Alexander Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940-1941* (Athens: Hellenic Publishing, 1945), 241.

At the same time, on the Italian military side, the magazine *Rassegna Italiana* published General Pariani's strategy. He conceived of it in its general concept as a terrific lightning assault

directed to shatter enemy lines.⁵⁰ These ideas of speed and power that circulated in the military circle, fully mirrored the guidance that Mussolini gave in other fields, such as the management of the national budget or the industrial sector. Similarly, the same concepts were soon also the blueprint of the initial plan for the offensive in Greece. Yet, the Italian military forces, despite the allocation of considerable resources and financial support (outspending the French in the 1935 to 1938 period), had failed to maximize and effectively leverage Italian industrial potential.⁵¹ Eventually, according to the historian Brian Sullivan, the result was that “Italy was simply unprepared for war in 1940.”⁵² Thus, Figure 5 shows the equipment fielding timeline circulating across the army general staff as of the end of 1939 and clearly evidences the acknowledgment of the great limitations in terms of weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and tanks suffered within the armed forces.

⁵⁰ Gaetano Salvemini, “Pietro Badoglio’s Role in the Second World War,” *The Journal of Modern History* 21, no. 4 (December 1949): 326-32, accessed 18 July 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1878286>.

⁵¹ Allan R. Millett, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth H. Watman, “The Effectiveness of Military Organizations,” *International Security* 11, no. 1 (1986): 37-71, accessed 20 September 2018, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538875>.

⁵² Brian R. Sullivan, “The Italian Armed Forces, 1918-1940,” in *Military Effectiveness*, vol 2., ed. Allan Reed Millett and Williamson Murray (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 170.

1940				1941				1942				1943				1944			
I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV
Velivoli e motori Automezzi					Velivoli Motori avio Automezzi														
Bombe R.A. Materiali per servizi logistici				mc. 200				Bombe R.A. m. e q. cal.							P.C.				
				Servizi logistici															
Cartucceria leggera Esplosivi di scoppio Mat. colleg. e segnal.						Cart. 12,7 Mat. colleg. e segnal.		Esplosivi di scoppio								Cartucceria leggera			
				Mitragliatrici 12,7							Mitragliatrici R.A.								
				Mitragliatrici 7,7 Mortai fanteria Armi individuali				Mortai fanteria				Armi individuali							
						Unità R.M. di N.C. Carri armati Trattori					Naviglio sottile	Carri armati				Trattori			
								«Roma»											
						Bombe per mortai fanteria										Bombe per mortai fanteria I/47			
								Artiglierie m. e g. cal. R.M. Esplosivi di lancio				Artiglierie m. e g. cal. R.M.				Esplosivi di lancio III/45			
												Artiglierie p.c. R.M.				Artiglierie p.c. R.M.			
FORZE ARMATE <i>Prevedibili epoche di consegna dei principali allestimenti per completare la preparazione di partenza</i> <i>Tempi occorrenti per la produzione del 100% del fabbisogno per il primo anno di guerra</i>												Cannoni fanteria				Cannoni fanteria			
												Mitragliatrici R.E. Munizionamento art. Munizionamento subacqueo				Mitragl. R.E. - Muniz. art. IV/49			
																Muniz. subacqueo IV/45			
																Artiglierie R.E.			

Figure 5. Equipment Fielding of the Italian Armed Forces as of December 1939. Mario Montanari, *Politica e Strategia in Cento Anni Di Guerre Italiane* (Rome: Stato maggiore dell'esercito, Ufficio storico, 1996), 93.

Respectively, each row on the chart illustrates the estimated quarter for completion of the fielding for that specific piece of equipment such as airplanes and engines [*velivoli e motori*], machine guns [*mitragliatrici*], or artillery [*artiglierie*]. Therefore, in the best-case scenario, the armed forces would not have achieved their complete readiness by the end of 1944.⁵³ Yet, Fascist ideology kept glorifying the importance of technology on the battlefield, magnifying war as something fought by heroes, airmen, and tank-crews, capable of incredible sacrifices for the destiny of humanity and for their glorious future, which was in glaring contrast to the actual dire situation of war equipment.

The German commitment to war in 1939 left the Italian dictator puzzling over the best solution to adopt. Thus, in one of his letters to Hitler prior to the beginning of the hostilities, Mussolini had stated his intentions to withhold Italian participation in the looming armed conflict

⁵³ Montanari, *Politica e Strategia in Cento Anni di Guerre Italiane*, 93.

on the basis that the two dictators had never discussed in their meetings the possibility of a major conflict earlier than 1942.⁵⁴ Hence, the letter, other than informing Hitler that Italy had not completed preparations for war, stated the uncertainty of an Italian future commitment to the war. Yet, Mussolini had a burning desire to join the conflict, while at the same time was waiting for the right moment, with the best odds, to enter the war and enhance the Italian strategic position in the Mediterranean. Eventually, that moment came the following year, in June 1940.

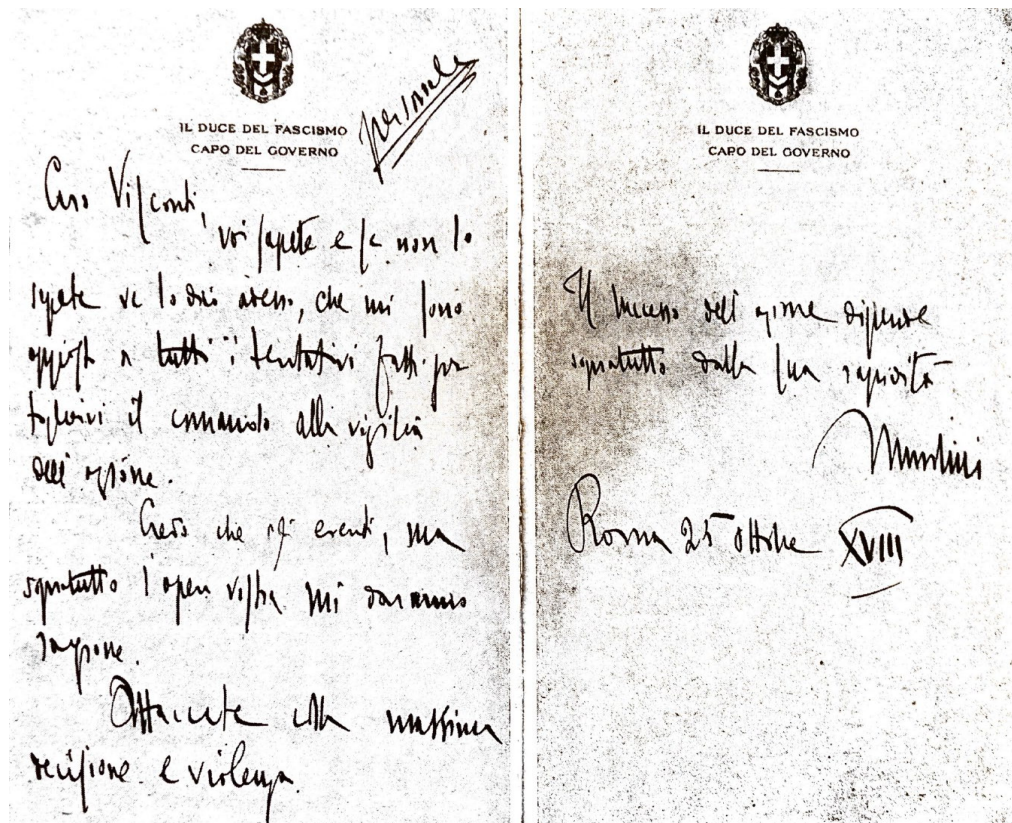
From the operational standpoint, the man who should have linked tactical actions with strategic objectives in the Greek offensive had not yet assumed command in that theater of operation. Prior to taking command in Albania, Visconti Prasca, was in Milan serving as a commander of III Corps, and was busy with road construction works to increase operational reach toward France in anticipation of an imminent Italian offensive on that front. Meanwhile, in Albania, Geloso, actual commander of the Italian forces, had already expressed to Ciano, the powerful foreign minister, his unfavorable professional assessment regarding an offensive in Greece. His staunch opposition to an invasion though, coupled with an alleged discontent that his leadership had caused among the Albanian populace, were more than enough reason for Mussolini to relieve him from the theater of operations. In light of that, Prasca seemed perfectly suited for the job. First, because he had already served in the Balkans and second, because he was that ambitious kind of commander who, in *Duce's* mind, might better have achieved the assigned military objectives.

The Under-Secretary at the Ministry of War, General Ubaldo Soddu, summoned Prasca in Rome on 26 May 1940, and together, the two generals went to Mussolini, who made clear that by appointing Prasca, he was extremely confident to achieve the Italian strategic objectives in Albania.⁵⁵ At that point, it was clear that he had in his mind the annexation of Greece.

⁵⁴ Benito Mussolini to Adolf Hitler, 25 August 1939, Italian Diplomatic Documents, No. 245 (Rome: Documenti Diplomatici Italiani).

⁵⁵ Visconti Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia*, 5-9.

Dear Visconti,



You know, and if you do not know, I am telling you now that I strongly opposed any attempt to relieve you from command at the eve of the action. I am sure that the events, but above all your direction, will prove me right. Go and attack with maximum resoluteness and aggressiveness. Success for this operation will entirely depend on your rapidity.

— Mussolini, Rome 25 October XVIII

Figure 6. Mussolini's Letter to General Visconti Prasca on the Eve of the Greek Campaign. Sebastiano Visconti Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia* (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1946).

Having stated his support for Prasca, Mussolini subtly implied that Prasca's predecessor was not up to the job. However, the opportunistic relief of a general with one less senior, generated bitterness among the Italian generals who did not believe in the competence of Prasca, but assessed the episode as mere preferential treatment. Thus, Prasca took command of the forces in Albania on 5 June 1940 and he immediately started studying all the operational plans envisioned for his area of responsibility and highlighted the shortfalls and weaknesses of the

theater.⁵⁶ Although the Italian general did not know it yet, he had initiated the cognitive process that doctrine calls Army Design Methodology and uses to frame problems and visualize conditions to set the desired end state. Hence, the first thing Prasca realized was the maneuver limitations caused by poor road conditions within Albanian territory and the paucity of Italian transports and motorized units. Those two components fundamentally affected his overall operational reach and tempo. Visconti Prasca directed his initial efforts likewise at III Corps. He sought to increase road mobility and create logistic supply bases in the vicinity of border locations where the terrain was particularly restricted.

Shortly after his arrival in Albania, Prasca understood that had the limelight of war moved in his direction. He would have the great opportunity to be commander of a major theater of operation, and more than likely he would earn his promotion on the field. Hence, Prasca worked relentlessly to bring about those changes to set the best conditions for a likely military operation either against Yugoslavia or against Greece. The confirmation of his intuitions did not wait long. On 13 August 1940, two days prior the sinking of the *Helle*, Prasca was in Rome, and the following day he was advising Mussolini on the military feasibility of an invasion in the Greek region of Epirus. Subsequently, Mussolini asked him if he thought his strength in Albania was enough to make an immediate occupation of that region. Prasca, in answering the question, heavily relied on the intelligence reports the Military Information Service (*Servizio Informazioni Militari*, or S.I.M.) provided him with, and stated that the Greek forces were extremely weak in that area and that the envisioned large-scale *coup de main* would have had great chances of success. However, he also warned that the organization for such an offensive would have taken additional time, for the attack positions were not ready yet, and the bulk of his forces were to re-orient toward Greece. Still, he advised Mussolini that to achieve surprise, the time to fulfill the necessary steps to get the army ready must not exceed a fortnight.

⁵⁶ Visconti Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia*, 5-9.

In furthering his professional assessment to Mussolini, General Prasca expressed the need to replace his artillery's horses with pack mules, because they were best suited for movement in the restricted terrain of the mountainous border with Greece. Still, he also advised the *Duce* to reinforce the divisions in Albania with unattached battalions instead of entire organic divisions in order to increase the tempo, overcome the limitation of the strengths of the division *binaria*, and anticipate the Greek mobilization.⁵⁷ Although he did not know modern doctrine, it was apparent that he was thinking and visualizing his approach through the very same elements of current operational art.

However, at Prasca's meeting with Mussolini, none of his actual military superiors were present, and the commander of the ground forces in Albania found himself embarrassed in bypassing them with that conversation. He was so uncomfortable with that unusual situation, that he forgot Mussolini was also the supreme commander of the armed forces. Subsequently and without hesitation, Visconti Prasca reminded Mussolini that his requests were subordinate to the approval of the army general staff. Hence, once dismissed from Palazzo Venezia, Prasca made his way to Marshal Pietro Badoglio to inform him about the conversation and asked him for explicit orders.⁵⁸ Badoglio was stunned, his face darkened as he listened to Visconti Prasca's comments regarding Mussolini, and plainly affirmed, "He's mad, now he wants Greece too."⁵⁹

Shortly thereafter, Prasca met with the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army, General Mario Roatta to discuss the meeting with Mussolini and the requests he presented to the army general staff. Roatta expressed complete disagreement with the idea of sending unattached battalions to reinforce units already on the front and said that he would send entire organic divisions instead. This solution though, due to the number of units, large equipment, and the time required would

⁵⁷ Tempo "is the relative speed and rhythm of military operations over time with respect to the enemy." US Army, *ADRP 3-0, Operations*, 2-7.

⁵⁸ Palazzo Venezia was the residence of Mussolini in Rome.

⁵⁹ Visconti Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia*, 34.

have reduced the possibility of achieving surprise to almost zero. Other than a merely different view on the military reinforcement for the operations, the general staff also regarded Prasca with great suspicion because of the way he went over the heads of his superiors and his direct relations with Mussolini.⁶⁰ Evidence of these cold relations between Prasca and his superiors was in the words of a telegram sent on 17 August, by Badoglio, “Inform General Visconti Prasca that his orders come exclusively from the army general staff.”⁶¹

Thus, given the delicacy of the situation, once Prasca returned in Tirana, he was concerned about how to prepare his forces for a looming offensive in Greece without disappointing the army general staff and alarming the Greeks. Meanwhile Ciano, the foreign minister, also pressed to prepare the offensive. He sent a message to Jacomoni, governor of Albania, with the intent to conduct a vigorous press campaign against Greece in Albania; adding that the Italian press would echo it in the timeliest manner.⁶² The situation was getting increasingly tense; the Italians were not prepared to neither seize Epirus nor invade Greece. On the military side, Badoglio and Ciano disagreed on the desire for war, however, Mussolini was interested in whether the Germans were successful in gaining prestige with their offensive. Furthermore, the general staff tried adapting to the vacillations of the man who was dictator and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Lastly, Prasca was looking forward to launching a large *coup de main*, while he feared that the possibility of success of this action might fade over the horizon.

Italian Offensive: 28 October–13 November 1940

Prasca conceived his operation essentially in three phases. The first phase was a quick thrust across the border to seize Epirus with his main effort, Army Corps “*Ciamuria*” (later

⁶⁰ Cervi, *The Hollow Legions, Mussolini's Blunder in Greece, 1940-1941*, 40-41.

⁶¹ Visconti Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia*, 37.

⁶² Cervi, *The Hollow Legions, Mussolini's Blunder in Greece, 1940-1941*.

redesignated XXV Corps). To protect the action of the main effort, Prasca devised a double envelopment. In the north, the *Julia* division across Pindus Heights was to occupy the Metsovo Pass, which was strategically important for communications and maneuver. From the coast, the *Raggruppamento Litorale* (Littoral Task Group) was to secure the coast up until Prevesa and to create the conditions for the subsequent occupation of Corfu, preventing any reinforcement from the mainland. Moreover, in the northern sector close to Macedonia, XXVI Army Corps had the task of securing the flank of the formation while conducting a feint to divert the enemy attention. The second phase was the establishment of an advance base on Corfu with massive navy employment to shorten the supply routes and establish conditions for a subsequent push into mainland Greece and occupation of Athens. The third phase was the occupation of the capital and seizure of the main ports including Salonika. Paramount throughout all phases was the intensive use of the air force to achieve air superiority and support the ground offensive.⁶³

The seizure of Yannina (the Italian name is Gianina) was the decisive operation for the Army Corps “*Ciamuria*,” for it represented key terrain connecting the inner Greek territory to the Adriatic Sea. Thus, operations began on 28 October. The Alpine division *Julia* immediately made its way to occupy the mountainous range of the Pindus and secure the left flank of the main effort. Hence, the Italians launched their main thrust toward Yannina with two divisions, *Ferrara* and *Centauro*. However, the plan’s weaknesses started to emerge immediately after the invasion began. The *Siena* division on the right-hand side of the main effort had to halt its advance by 30 October because the Kalamas River was unfordable due to the heavy rain. On the left flank of the main effort, *Julia* had achieved incredible successes. The division had advanced across the mountainous terrain of the Pindus and seized in four days the decisive point of Furka, deemed fundamental to reach the Metsovo Pass, and to enable the flow of sustainment for the following operations. Initial success notwithstanding, the possibility of a harsh war loomed large,

⁶³ Cervi, *The Hollow Legions, Mussolini’s Blunder in Greece, 1940-1941*, 166-167.

considering the good Greek defensive organization and the worsening weather conditions.⁶⁴ The situation on the easternmost sector was more static with the three divisions of XXVI Army Corps, *Parma*, *Venezia*, and *Piemonte*, which were to hold their positions to block any attempt of the Greeks to outflank the Italian units.

The Pindus sector, where the *Julia* was to launch its attack, was the one that likely gave hope to Prasca, instead of the anticipated axis Kalibaki-Yannina. In fact, this sector saw an initial favorable force ratio for the Italians with five infantry battalions against two. The odds seemed in favor of a rapid success.⁶⁵ The objectives were the Metsovo Pass and the defensive positions between Plaka and Peristeri. Looking at this situation in terms of operational art, the German general Helmuth von Moltke could not have been more correct in his statement that, “No plan survives the first collision with the main body of the enemy.”⁶⁶ Hence, the advantageous situation on the Pindus would have suggested reassessing the situation, revising the plan, and shifting the combat power toward the line of operation that presented more operational opportunities. However, that was not the case, and the *Julia* division commander did not receive any reinforcements to exploit the situation, but his immediate higher headquarters still considered that *Julia* was to conduct a shaping operation and therefore, did not adjust its operational priorities.

In the frantic initial days of the invasion, General Mario Girotti, the *Julia* division commander, also decided to divorce the logistic framework from the bulk of his force. He left his sustainment units near Ersekë in the rear area while the regiments kept pushing forward with the fight, foreseeing a quick end of the operation and neglecting the possibility that the plan might not unfold as envisioned. In fact, overstretching the logistic haul resulted in a major operational mistake in which throughput became extremely difficult. Additionally, the poor sustainment

⁶⁴ Montanari, *Politica e Strategia in Cento Anni Di Guerre Italiane*, 361.

⁶⁵ Raffaelli, *Campagna di Grecia*, 53-58.

⁶⁶ Helmuth Graf von Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (New York: Presidio Press, 1996), 2.

situation added to the inclement weather conditions of the end of October 1940 that had made ground mobility extremely difficult.

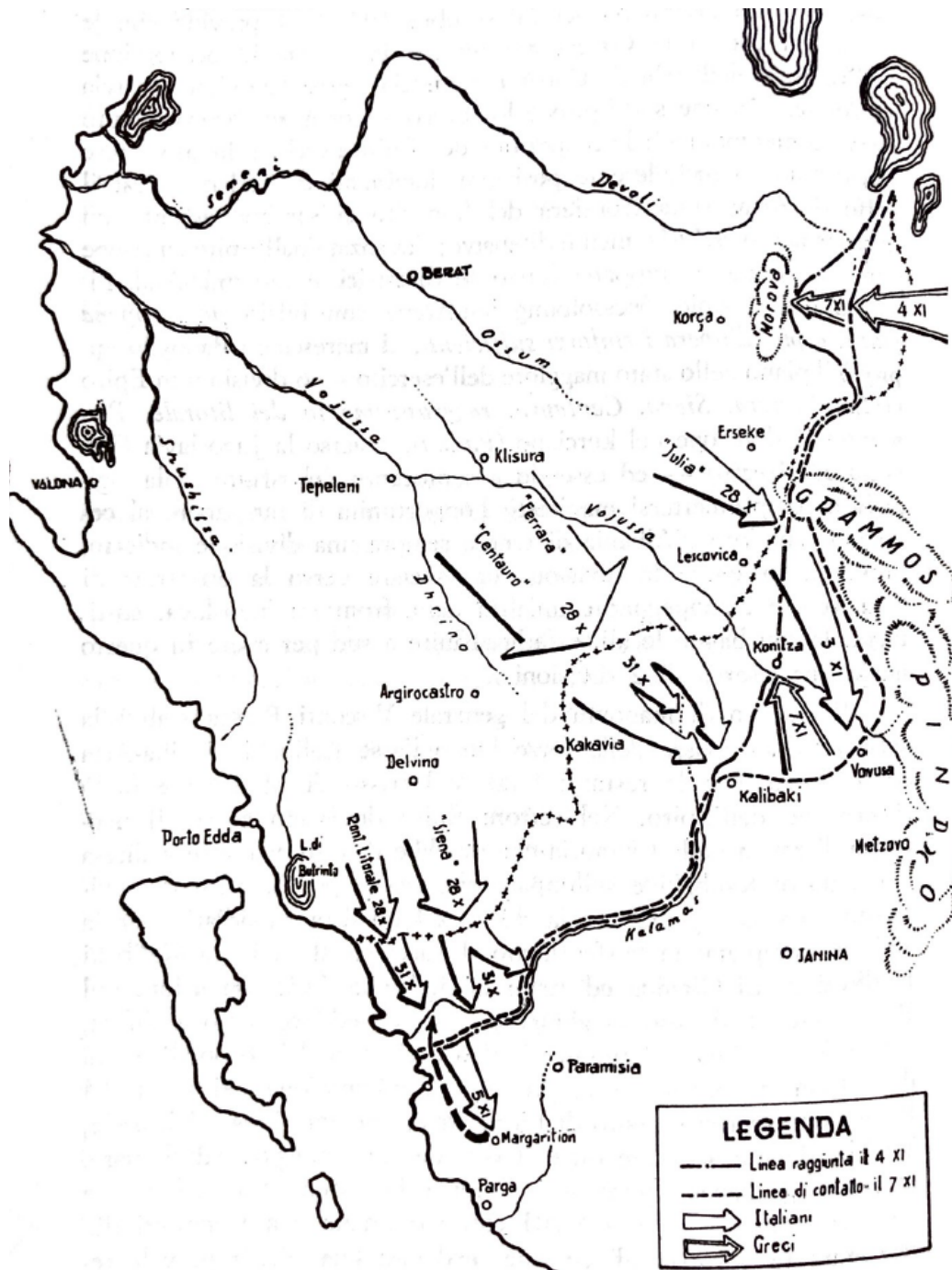


Figure 7. Initial Italian offensive (28 October–13 November 1940). Filippo Stefani, *La Storia Della Dottrina e Degli Ordinamenti Dell'Esercito Italiano*, vol. 2 (Rome: SME, Ufficio storico, 1985), 134.

Nevertheless, the momentous achievement of Julia's *Alpini* created great dilemmas for the Greeks, for they did not expect such an advance in restricted terrain and were not ready to oppose the Italian forces in that sector. Yet, the Greek supreme headquarters reacted quickly, with extreme flexibility mitigating the risk of the collapse of the front, and showed, simultaneously, a significant understanding of the enemy's decisive points; they did the sort of adjustment the Italians failed to do with their plans. Thus, the Greeks consequently ordered all units in the area to reinforce defensive positions on the Pindus. They re-assessed the situation and reassigned the units that initially were under the command of the Section of the Army of Western Macedonia (in Italian, *Sezione d'Armata della Macedonia Occidentale* – SAMO) to II Army Corps, which was closer to the area of operation and therefore, could have better directed the ensuing operations. The Greek reaction achieved immediate effects, and by the night of 30 October, the actual ratio of the units shifted in their favor; ten Greek battalions now faced five Italian. The Greeks, in fact, wanted to set the conditions for a possible counterattack in that sector, envisioning as their ultimate objective, the town of Korca, west of the Morova high ground.

Prasca seemed to have understood the operational importance of tempo nonetheless. Thus he revised the force organization and placed *Julia* under his direct orders and bypassed Girotti. Prasca also reasoned on the possibility that he would have a trump card to anticipate a deeper push other than merely mitigating the possibility of Greek reinforcements across the Pindus. Hence, his intuition was a testimony of the effective application of operational art to generate flexibility and enhance tempo within the Italian ground forces. Yet, this attempt at creating a more flexible mission command structure proved ineffective when the hostilities began. Clausewitzian fog and friction and Prasca's leadership took their toll on the Italian effort. For example, Girotti's decision to divorce the logistic services from the two regiments of the division was a testimony of the limits of the overall plan. That decision had two main shortcomings. First, it exposed soldiers to incredibly harsh conditions in the ensuing days of combat and did not take into account that the army was still suffering from ill-suited vehicles and transport shortages.

Moreover, both Girotti and Prasca sidestepped the security requirements necessary for a forward logistics base in the rear area and offered an easy target for a likely Greek counterattack.

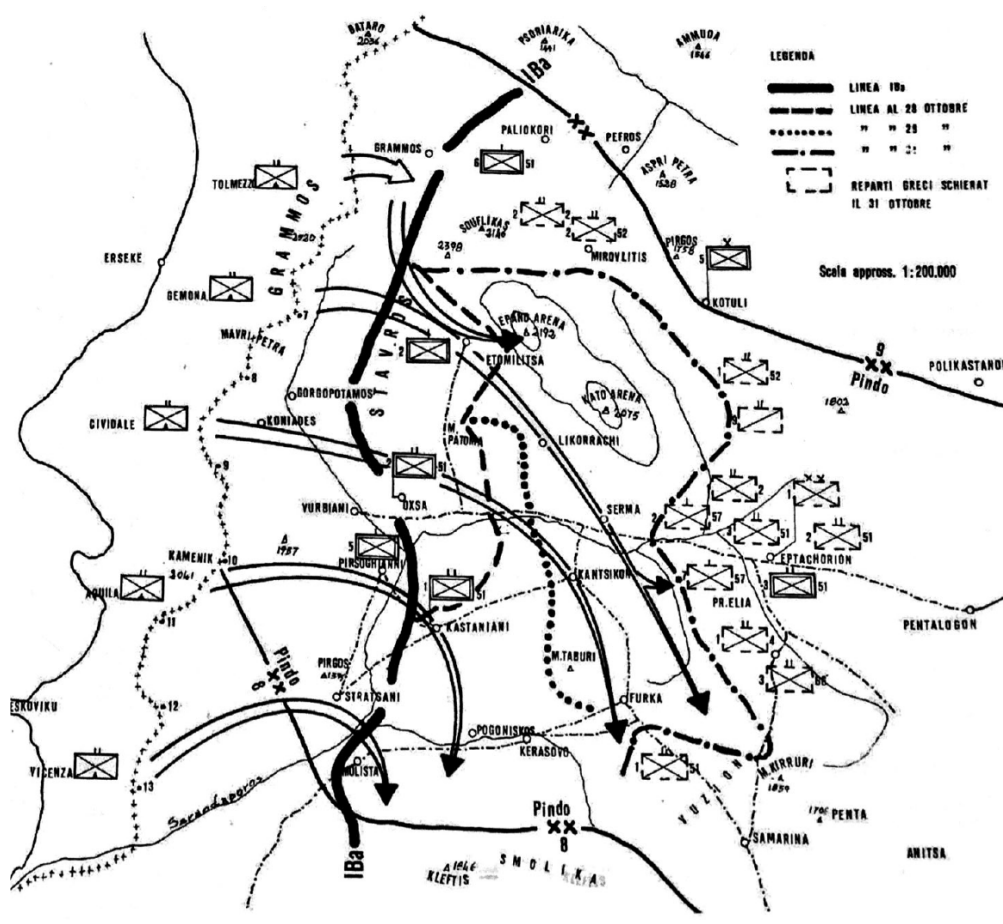


Figure 8. Operations in the Pindus sector (28 October–31 October 1940). Enzo Raffaelli, Stefano Gamarotto, Renato Callegari, and Giandomenico Pagnacco, *Campagna di Grecia: Alpini e Fanti: la tragica avventura ellenica, le conseguenze dell'8 settembre 1943, Creta, Cefalonia, Corfù, Lero* (Treviso: Editrice Storica, 2010), 49.

On the morning of 31 October, the overall situation was excellent; the Eighth Regiment had occupied the communication hub of Furka, while the Ninth Regiment had prepared its positions in the area at the base of the Smolika mountain range. The Italian units had created a bulge of approximately ten kilometers within the Greek mountainous territory of the Pindus that made Prasca mistakenly optimistic in his report to the army general staff. Meanwhile in Rome, on 1 November, Badoglio was summoning a meeting to discuss how to reinforce the operation in

Greece. In that meeting, Roatta brought to his senior general's attention that it was necessary to send additional divisions to reinforce the rear area and to rotate the units that were fighting, although Prasca had not mentioned that his forces were getting close to their culmination. Nevertheless, Mussolini was not stupid and looked at the unfolding of the campaign with extreme attention and for a short period, moved his command post in Grottaglie where he set up a closer headquarters to the theater. From there, as further manifestation of his looming concern, he sent General Francesco Pricolo, chief of the air force and a trusted observer, to the front to have a more accurate firsthand report of the situation.

This episode evidenced the critical narrow vision of the operational commander who thought that the strategical objectives assigned were still achievable, without his having reframed his understanding of the operational environment. The situation had changed; it was not what Prasca had anticipated. Furthermore, nobody realized that supply flow would soon become a significant problem. The poor analysis of logistics, specifically in terms of basing for *Julia*, and the fact that weather conditions were not improving as the campaign wore on, did not accelerate the Italian military organization. Conversely, the Greeks had understood the concept of Italian operations and reacted accordingly. They anticipated that the objective of the advance would be to occupy Metsovo Pass. Hence, their reaction was extremely effective and met the empathy of the local population, who supported the young Greek soldiers, often without enough training, in carrying their equipment, weapons, and ammunition across the Pindus's rugged terrain.⁶⁷ Ciano's and the Italian intelligence service's prediction that the attitude of the Greek population was unfavorable to their government had proved flawed and inaccurate.

⁶⁷ Montanari, *Politica e Strategia in Cento Anni Di Guerre Italiane*, 338-339.

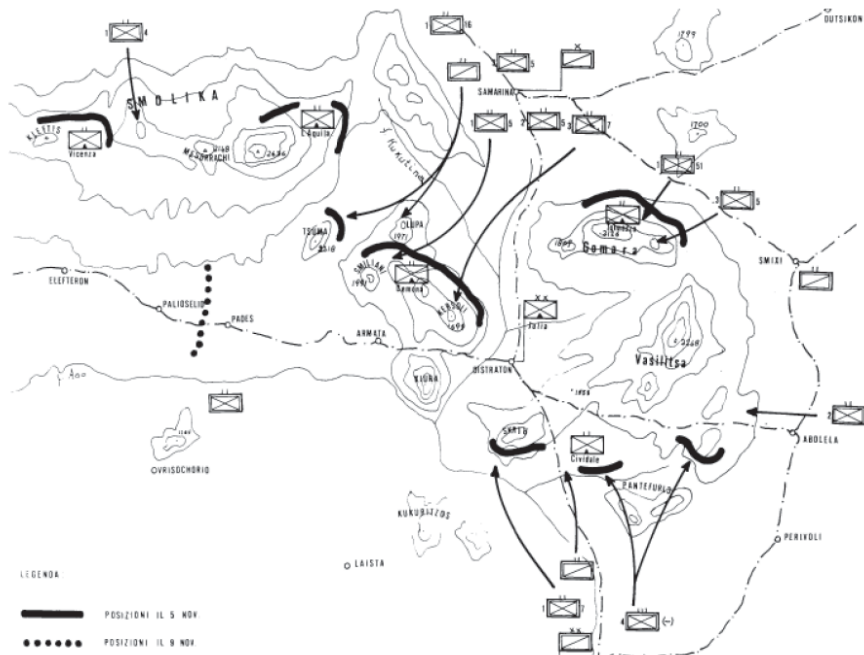


Figure 9. Operations on Pindus (5 November–9 November 1940). Mario Montanari, *La Campagna Di Grecia* (Rome: SME, Ufficio storico, 1980).

On 1 November, while the Greeks were getting ready to counterattack, the Alpine Eighth Regiment made its way across the Furka hub to the village of Samarina where it reorganized by the end of the same day to cross the Smolika heights south to occupy the village of Distraton.⁶⁸ Once there, the battalions set up their positions that they eventually occupied until 5 November when the Greek started their counterattack. Meanwhile, the Ninth Regiment was further south and after failing to cross the Vojussa River, received orders to head toward Distraton where it was to link-up with the Eighth Regiment. However, Greek artillery shelled Distraton heavily, and prevented the two regiments from reuniting. Subsequently, the Ninth took cover in the area between the villages of Paleoselio and Pades. At that moment, the Greeks attacked, for they saw the possibility of splitting the *Julia*'s infantry and destroying them piecemeal.

On 3 November, *Julia* had already been fighting for a week, had only five days of supplies left, and the situation grew even worse when the Greeks counterattacked two days later.

⁶⁸ See figure 9.

Thus, while Girotti's air supply request went almost unattended, the Eighth Regiment had organized its defensive positions in the area around Distraton, where on 5 November, after eight hours of fierce fighting, the regiment managed to push back a fierce Greek assault. Still, at Distraton, although outnumbered by Greek forces, the Italian battalions achieved momentous results. Eventually, the price of the day was a staggering casualty rate with 126 dead soldiers, 259 wounded, and 306 missing in action.⁶⁹

The watershed for the operations on that sector was on 7 November, when the optimistic Prasca eventually realized the gravity of the situation and admitted that the offensive had reached its conclusion. Thus, the Eighth Regiment received the order to disengage and to pull back along the axis Pades-Elefteron, while the Ninth was to provide security for its movement. A memorandum on 8 November to the incoming commander of the ground forces in Greece, General Ubaldo Soddu, documented this episode and praised the action of the Alpine division on the Pindus stating, "*Julia's* tactical maneuver was outstanding and executed with compelling spirit, training and decisiveness, which enabled the success of the entire operation."⁷⁰

From an operational standpoint, the entire initial offensive of Italian ground forces drew upon four fundamental assumptions, all of which proved almost entirely wrong in terms of operational tempo, operational reach, basing, and lines of operation. The first assumption was the ability to deliver a quick thrust across the border and to seize the major objectives in Epirus within two weeks. A second assumption was the establishment of an advance base on the island of Corfu with the massed employment of the navy to shorten Italian supply routes. An additional assumption was the massing of the air force to achieve air superiority and to support ground

⁶⁹ Raffaelli, *Campagna di Grecia*, 61-64.

⁷⁰ Visconti Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia*, 239.

operations. The final assumption was the prompt arrival of reinforcements to sustain the fight along the entire front.⁷¹

Greek counteroffensive: 14 November–28 December 1940

While Italians reached their culmination, the Greeks prepared for their major counteroffensive. Plan IBa, the Greek counteroffensive plan adopted on 1 September 1939, took its designations from the anticipated combination of Italy and Bulgaria. The Greek concept of operations for the offensive was to attack Italian forces on the north, in the Korca sector in order to outflank them, and deliver a decisive blow against the *Julia* Division further south in the Pindus sector. The center sector, from Mount Grammos to the Aoos River, was under II Army Corps, whose main task was to support III Army Corps in the north and to attack in the direction of Ersekë. The last sector was the Epirus, where the Italians had concentrated most of their combat power, in which the Greek I Army Corps was to capture and secure the key node of the Merdjani junction.

The Hellenic army launched its offensive on 14 November with III Army Corps; it was the main attack against the Italian northern sector, which was also the weakest portion of the enemy organization. Thus, the offensive began with three infantry divisions, which were the 10th, the 9th, and the 15th divisions, reinforced by 16 November with additional two divisions, the 11th and the 13th.⁷² The ground along this axis of advance, though mountainous, offered better chances from the point of view of accessibility and did not allow the Italians to use mechanized forces. By 21 November, the Greeks had completed the occupation of the Morova heights. It was a week of stubborn resistance; the Alpine division *Tridentina* had also arrived and reinforced Italian units in that fight. However, the Greeks, managed to push through and occupy the town of Koritsa and the Karit Pass, achieving in that sector their main objective. Meanwhile, in the center,

⁷¹ Visconti Prasca, *Io ho aggredito la Grecia*, 166-167.

⁷² Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940-1941*, 273-274.

the Greeks had been fighting another important battle: they captured the town of Ersekë and pushed their advance further west to secure the strategic highway in the vicinity of Eskoviku, increasing, in this way, both freedom of action and operational reach. Hence, their offensive ultimately proved successful for various reasons. First, the Greeks succeeded in pushing back the Italian forces. Secondly, they managed to cross the frontier and occupy strategic areas in the Albanian territory by 22 November 1940. Lastly, their lack of tanks and Italian superiority with mortars and heavy artillery notwithstanding, the Greek forces achieved their objectives with the occupation of the Morova heights, the safe use of the Merdjani – Eskoviki – Koritsa highway, and the complete expulsion of the enemy from their national territory. Such unexpected success significantly bolstered units' morale providing them with further advantage in the cognitive domain of the operations.

The success of the counteroffensive spurred the Greeks to push forward, so they laid down new operational objectives that their main formations were to achieve. Additionally, the general instructions issued by 23 November from the Greek high command envisioned the continuance of the offensive with a main push on the left wing as a hammer to hit the anvil on the north represented by the Army of West Macedonia.⁷³ The first objective was the occupation of the mountain range west of Argirocastro and the area around the town to provide freedom of movement along the roads linking the inner territory with the coast. The Greek army had essentially three corps on the northern front to oppose the Italians. However, the Greeks did not organize these units as a field army, and instead favored a more flexible organization instead. In hindsight, this choice proved successful and represented one of the landmarks of the Greek counteroffensive.

Conversely, the flaws of the Italian operational conduct started to play out significantly from this moment forward. On 5 November 1940, Soddu arrived in Albania at Prasca's

⁷³ Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940-1941*, 278-281.

headquarters telling Prasca that his task was to accelerate the transport of troops from Italy and therefore, to extend the operational reach and reinforce Prasca's plan. Yet, that was not the real reason. The next day, Soddu disclosed to his old friend that he was there as the new commander and would soon take over officially. Interestingly enough, Soddu said further to his friend, "You see how well we shall work together and both of us will become full generals and then marshals of Italy."⁷⁴

At this moment of the campaign, the decision to replace Prasca and to reorganize the command structure on 9 November, coupled with the lack of a contingency plan, made the possibility of a general defeat loom larger. Hence, the readjustment of the Italian command structure resulted in a major vulnerability for the Italian military. It did not provide any real advantage, but instead complicated and slowed the execution of operations. Furthermore, the delay in reinforcements from Italy and soldiers' plummeting morale also appeared to drag down the entire situation toward a dismal defeat. Moreover, from this episode emerges the ambition and careerism that animated many high-ranking officers during the Fascist period. For example, Soddu had found it appropriate to comfort his old friend by suggesting the likelihood of a promotion, which surely did not make much sense at that moment.

In light of this reassurance, Prasca thought that he still was the favorite commander on the ground and would be given the opportunity for a decisive blow in Epirus. Therefore, he kept asking his old friend to agree with a new attack in his sector. However, this belief faded away in the following days when, on 11 November, in a sort of revenge, Geloso took over Parsca's command of the Eleventh Army. Furthermore, later that same month, the minister of war released Prasca from the active-duty service list and sent him home on permanent leave (a kind way to say that he was no longer necessary). Hence, the general who initially made Mussolini so confident

⁷⁴ Cervi, *The Hollow Legions, Mussolini's Blunder in Greece 1940-1941*, 145-146.

about achieving the strategic objectives, eventually found himself dismissed and retired less than six months from the moment he took the job.

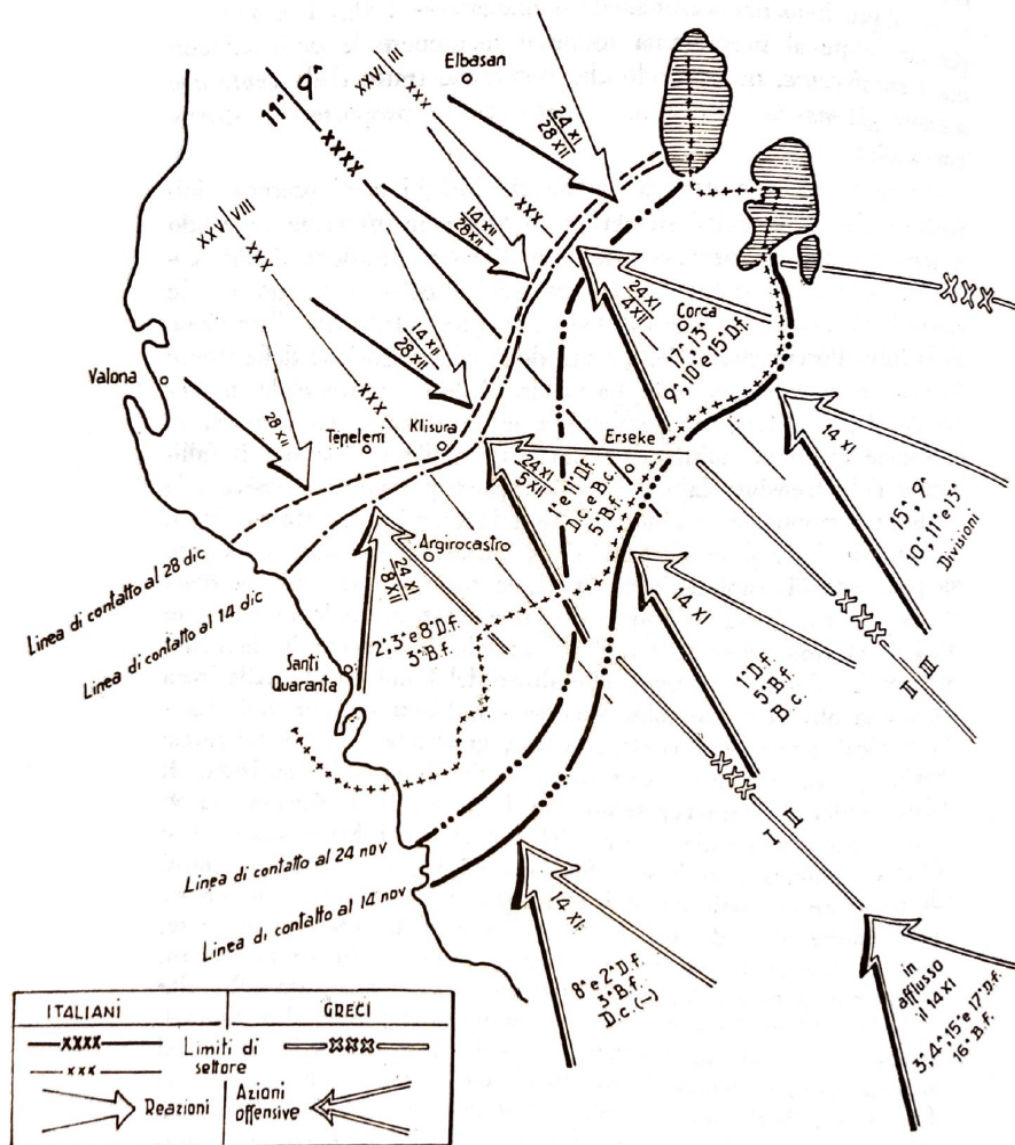


Figure 10. Greek counterattack (14 November–28 December 1940). Filippo Stefani, *La Storia Della Dottrina e Degli Ordinamenti Dell'Esercito Italiano* (Rome: SME, Ufficio storico, 1985), 138.

However, with Soddu's arrival, the situation did not improve, but got worse for the army on the ground. The morale of the men began to break down and losses increased. The men of the *Julia* Division had been fighting through the difficulties of weather and restricted terrain, and had

been ordered to hold their positions to the end, and yet they eventually received orders to pull back and fight from new positions. Awkwardly, once they managed to do that, a new order arrived and they had to back up again and find a new and safer line of defense. Evidently, the events were unfolding so quickly that they superseded any ability to anticipate changes. Moreover, the articulation of the command structure added confusion to the poor planning and made the situation untenable. Thus, Major Giacomo Fatuzzo, commander of the Aquila Alpine Battalion, *Julia* Division, recorded the melancholic breakdown of his men's morale. On 18 November, he remarked, "Today we have to leave our positions, where our blood has been spilled a lot so far. The Alpines cannot understand the reasons for this withdrawal, and more than that they do not understand why they have been told to withhold their positions to the end."⁷⁵

Meanwhile, shortly after the beginning of the Greek offensive, Soddu bitterly realized the gravity of the situation, writing in his memorandum to the army general staff that, "In the Ersekë sector the enemy has occupied our positions and our counterattack to retake them has failed, ultimately the situation may unfold to the necessity of a withdrawal."⁷⁶ Geloso informed Soddu of the gravity of the situation advising for a wide withdrawal to give respite to the units and reorganize a better defensive line. However, Soddu's personal pride was still strong. He did not want to admit to Rome that he was not able to shift the tide of the events containing the Greeks and did not agree immediately with Geloso's idea, but ordered a slow withdrawal executed by phases that increased the number of fights and raised losses in the Italian army.

Examining the definition of strategy as a quest to achieve and maintain a position of relative advantage, the Greek campaign evidenced a case where the flaws in the arrangement of

⁷⁵ Giacomo Fatuzzo, *Storia Della "Julia" Nella Campagna Di Grecia* (Milan: Longanesi, 1970), 95.

⁷⁶ Raffaelli, *Campagna di Grecia*, 78.

the tactical activities determined the failure of the Italian strategy.⁷⁷ Similarly, the scholar Edward Luttwak would point to the shortcomings that affected both the vertical and the horizontal dimension of strategy.⁷⁸ By December 1940, when the Greek thrust had reached its maximum penetration, Mussolini had already requested the German support to counter and repel the Hellenic counteroffensive. With that request, Italy had essentially wound up assuming an ancillary role for any forthcoming war decision.

Conclusion

The Italian campaign in Greece provides a fresh historical perspective in the study of modern doctrine and strategical military environments. Thus, it is useful to adopt Luttwak's theory of strategy as a lens to interpret operational art as an interdependent component of the more complex system of strategy.⁷⁹ Hence, the case study of the Greek campaign offers a good set of doctrinal patterns whose validity clearly extends across time.⁸⁰ Indeed, Prasca, in developing and executing his invasion campaign, faced the same operational problems that modern planners struggle with when they devise a theater campaign plan.

The Roman dictum *si vis pacem para bellum* is the base of Luttwak's paradoxical logic of strategy. Had Mussolini used the same counter intuitiveness, he would have likely averted the invasion of Greece in 1940 and shaped a different strategy. Thus, analyzing the events of the Greek campaign from what Luttwak defines horizontal and vertical dimension, it emerges that Italy failed to achieve its strategic objectives because of the poor application of operational art,

⁷⁷ Everett C Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principle in the Space and Information Age* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), 21.

⁷⁸ Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 87-91.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 234-240.

⁸⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 30-31.

but also because it lacked a coherent national strategy. The first of Luttwak's two dimensions deals with diplomacy and the relations among state-actors, while the second focuses on the employment of resources through different levels. The analysis of these levels helps shed light on the causal relationships that the decisions of the Italian military-political elite and Prasca himself brought about. Thus, the American scholar identifies five specific levels to address; technology, tactics, operations, theater strategy, and grand strategy which are fundamental to examine military problems. Hence, the lack of appreciation of their interdependence may result in unsound decisions. Paradoxical choices are therefore justified in the sake of victory to achieve surprise or a position of relative advantage over the enemy, and sometimes, over a powerful ally, as it was the case of the Nazi Germany.⁸¹

As mentioned, diplomatic relations have a significant role for the horizontal dimension. The Italian diplomacy in fact, had a negative influence on the decision-making process prior to launching the Greek campaign. Thus, it was the foreign minister, Galeazzo Ciano, who strongly pushed Mussolini to invade Greece by reporting that a large portion of the population opposed the Greek government and was ready to support a foreign overthrow of Metaxas dictatorship. Such a situation indeed would have favored the operations, but the reality was quite the opposite. Furthermore, the underestimation of the binding force of the support agreement that Turkey had signed with Greece in 1933, also drove the Italian diplomacy toward another false assumption regarding the Bulgarian willingness to join a war against Greece. Thus, it did not happen, for the Bulgarians wanted to avert dragging the Turks into the hostilities and did not want to fight a war on two fronts with a third front threatened by a likely escalation of the situation in Yugoslavia.

Similarly, as for the vertical dimension, the assumptions that the campaign would achieve surprise and exploit Greek unpreparedness also proved mistaken on multiple levels. Regardless of Prasca's early demonstration of his intimate understanding of technology, tactics, and operations

⁸¹ Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, 4.

in terms of both operational reach and risk, his actions did not overcome the limitations that these very same elements presented to his organization. The achievements of the Italian units notwithstanding, Prasca failed to attain the objectives anticipated, for he did not provide for the lack of mobility and logistic basing. As for the technological level, the Italians had the edge in mortars, heavy artillery, and mechanized forces that could have made the difference if wisely employed.⁸² That was not the case and the Greeks had the opportunity to fight mostly in their best conditions. Moreover, the unanticipated inclement weather, the problems in river crossing operations, and again in mobility were additional aspects that Prasca overlooked and that further weakened his plan before the campaign. As a result, the plan could not have been more disharmonic from an operational standpoint. Nevertheless, Prasca had a quite clear perception of decisive points, lines of operations, and objectives, but he almost completely neglected the units' lack of equipment and supply from the very outset of the operation.

As for the theater level of strategy, the disharmony emerged from the joint coordination and support with the other services, which mostly failed, for both the air force and the navy were unable to support the war effort as expected. Shortly after the substitution of Prasca, these sets of problems and mistakes ushered in a blame game in the corridors of power in Rome and further evidenced Luttwak's theory that vertical and horizontal dimensions are strictly interdependent. Thus, on the meeting of 10 November, with his top military brass, consisting of Badoglio, Cavagnari, Pricolo, and Roatta, Mussolini blamed Prasca and Jacomoni for the nonexistent Albanian uprising in Ciamuria and the unexpectedly stiff Greek resistance. However, this time Badoglio reacted and answered the *Duce*, blaming him for the decision to attack. He literally said, "I have made these remarks in order to demonstrate that neither the supreme general staff nor the army staff had anything to do with this decision, which was carried out in a manner that totally contradicts our whole system, which is founded on the principle of first preparing oneself well,

⁸² Montanari, *Politica e Strategia in Cento Anni Di Guerre Italiane*, 90-97.

and then taking the risks.”⁸³ The statement not only was a bitter accusation of Mussolini but from a different perspective, revealed the ill-structured strategy behind the decision to attack Greece. Furthermore, the pushback from Badoglio was significant, for it marked the breakdown in the relationship between the two. In hindsight, one may argue that Badoglio’s reaction occurred too late to shift the tide of the campaign in Greece. However, had the politicians heeded the message of the supreme chief of the armed forces from that moment forward, the following year they would have averted the same kind of mistakes on the Russian front.

In conclusion, the study of the Italian parallel war in Greece provides a useful example from a doctrinal standpoint to modern military planners and historians. First, it sheds light on a significant episode that evinces the relevance across time of operational art in developing a large-scale operation. Second, it provides a powerful lens to understand a piece of the strategic context of World War II. As for the perspective of operational art, the shortsightedness of military commanders emerged with regard to concepts such as basing and operational reach. That proved decisive, for example, when the *Julia* Division was to withdraw, namely because, in retrospect, it was the only unit that could have achieved a successful blow.

The first difficulty was the balance between politics and military decisions. That was apparent in Mussolini’s lust to achieve a strategic position of advantage, which sidestepped Prasca and the Italian generals’ good initial intuition and paid attention to Ciano’s wrong recommendations instead. Hence, strategic risk increased overall, commanders’ leadership on the ground weakened, and ultimately the entire campaign failed. Thus, it was the weakness of the entire operation process more than anything else that proved detrimental to the ability of the commanders to seize the opportunity and drive the operations on the ground to the anticipated objectives.⁸⁴ On the Greek front in 1940 though, only qualities such as personal hardiness,

⁸³ Comando Supremo, *Diario storico del Comando Supremo*, tomo II, doc. 61 (Rome: SME, Ufficio storico, 1945).

⁸⁴ US Army, *ADRP 5-0, The Operation Process*, 1-2.

courage, strong sense of loyalty and honor of the units and the brave soldiers remained as instrument to offset, at least partially, the deficiencies in training and equipment.

The second aspect was that the Greek campaign decisively affected the Italian strategic role pushing it for the rest of the war to the sideline of the alliance with Germany. The complete breakdown of the strategic equilibrium occurred in the first months of 1941 when German units joined the war effort on the Greek front. Mussolini's all-out strategy, while aiming at reinforcing the position of Italy within the alliance with Germany, ultimately neglected coherence across dimensions of strategy bringing about a poor implementation of operational art.⁸⁵ Furthermore, the concentration of resources in the Italian-Greek conflict diverted Italian land, air, and sea forces at a time when they were essential for North Africa to parry the British attack.⁸⁶ Luckily, the British acted in the same way and consequently their operations in Libya started lagging behind in sending aid to Greece.⁸⁷

Hence, the importance of Clausewitz's intuition that beyond the culminating point of victory an army runs the risk of exhaustion and defeat, finds a valid example with the Italian offensive operation in Greece.⁸⁸ Furthermore, political leaders, like Mussolini, who was intoxicated with strategic success, did not look at a military campaign with a systemic perspective, neglecting interdependence of factors and therefore, they bring disaster upon themselves and their nation; that was precisely the fate that expected Italy in Greece.⁸⁹ Hence, it

⁸⁵ Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, 234-240.

⁸⁶ James J. Sadkovich, "The Italo-Greek War in Context: Italian Priorities and Axis Diplomacy," *The Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 3 (July 1993): 439-64.

⁸⁷ Peter Ewer, "The British Campaign in Greece 1941: Assumptions about Operational Art and Their Influence on Strategy," *The Journal of Military History* 76 (July 2012): 727-45.

⁸⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Eliot Howard, and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 566-568.

⁸⁹ Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 220-222.

is paramount that military leaders should address military problems informing their approach in a systemic perspective to achieve objectives and avoid the pitfalls of personal drive and ambition, exactly unlike what Prasca did during his last job.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 74-75.

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